# Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 40: Disabled Writers

Guest: Keah Brown

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

## Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey hey! Happy holidays this December to all who celebrate! And welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is about disabled writers featuring an interview with Keah Brown, journalist, freelance writer, and creator of the hashtag #DisabledAndCute. Keah will talk about representation of disability in media and pop culture, tips for writers starting out, and a little preview of her upcoming book of essays titled *The Pretty One*, coming out in 2019 from Atria Books. Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: Keah, thank you so much for being on my podcast today. Why don't you introduce yourself and just tell our listeners a little bit about your background, about who you are?

KEAH BROWN: Sure! First of all, thank you for having me on. I'm so excited that we're finally doing this. And my name is Keah. I am a writer and a journalist, and I focus a lot in journalism on the entertainment side, so like talking about TV shows and movies and talking to various actors and actresses, etc. But in my non-fiction work, what I do is talk about a variety of things through the lens of disability. My favorite thing to talk about is representation in media for people with disabilities and how it vastly needs to change because what we have right now is not what we deserve. So, a lot of what I do is literally kind of talk about navigating the world through the lens of disability. It might not always be the subject, but everything that I approach through the lens of accessibility and disability.

## Media representation of disability

ALICE: What are some of your thoughts in terms of what's out there lately that you love, don't love? What have you seen lately that really excites you?

KEAH: What excites me right now—and I know that there are issues with the show itself in regard to this portrayal—but I really love NBC's *Superstore*. I am obsessed with, I love Garrett. I think that he's funny and just sarcastic, and I feel like he reminds me so much of myself without his disability being his sole plot point. I just really love the way that he's written. And I know that

they have a consultant on the show, but the actor who plays him is not disabled in real life. So, that's the issue.

I was really into *Speechless*, but I got tired of not seeing people who looked like me on the show. I know that there was some talk about how they're finally going to let disabled people of color have speaking roles in the show, but I just feel like, I don't know, I felt like it's kind of too late. It took too long, I think.

And so, for me, [chuckles] those are the only two sort of positive representations that we have. Everything else is kind of you know, just not what I would like to see for a variety of reasons, but the first being that *Speechless* is still so white. And with *Superstore*, like I said Garrett, the actor who plays him, is not actually disabled. But out of the two, I love NBC's *Superstore* so much. I just think it's refreshing that people see us as human beings on that show! You know what I mean? We're not just these plot points for tragedy and these plot points for anger. I feel like NBC's *Superstore* gives Garrett sexual agency and sarcasm, and he just, he really seems so sure of himself, and he likes himself so much. I think that's the kind of representation that I think that we deserve.

ALICE: Yeah, and I think we can definitely, as activists, fight for both: better characters that are written and the fight for actual disabled people playing disabled characters.

KEAH: Absolutely. Because that, to me, is so important. I think when I first started out as an activist, baby activist Keah, I was like, oh, you know, it sucks that disabled people aren't acting in these roles. But it was a thing that I could sort of be like, you know, it's a problem, but it's not that big of a problem. But it is. Now I know. I think that's what happens with growth is that it's not OK. I think if you can say to yourself, "I wanna have a disabled character on my TV show or in my movie," you should also say, "Hey, why don't I look to hire someone who actually lives that experience and can bring to the stage or the show or the movie what it is that somebody else who is not actually disabled obviously lacks?" You know what I mean? I think that what we have to make sure happens is not just hiring disabled people as consultants but also putting us in front of the camera and behind it.

You know, I was for the book, *The Pretty One*, out in 2019 via Atria, I had been doing research on how many disabled people that have disclosed are in writers' rooms. And it's so disappointing, and I think that a lot of it has to do with stigma. Because you can bet your lucky stars that are actually disabled people in these writers' rooms, but they're too afraid to disclose because of stigma. And I feel like what we have to do is change the ideal around what disability is and what it can be so that we can fight the stigma and get people in these rooms that can give us representation that isn't so terrible!

For me, I'm one of those people that wants to do it all. I wanna write TV, I wanna write movies, I wanna write books. I just wanna run the gamut of all these things that I love. But I also know that it's going to be harder for me because I am physically disabled, and I have invisible disabilities. And so, I think there's just a lot of change that has to happen because otherwise, we'll never have the opportunities that we deserve, and we'll never be in the rooms where these big things happen the way that we deserve to be.

[upbeat, poppy music break]

## Unruly Bodies essay with Roxane Gay

ALICE: On another subject, you recently wrote a essay in a collection called *Unruly Bodies*, edited by Roxane Gay featuring 25 writers. And tell me how this came about and what it means to you to be part of this anthology.

KEAH: It means the world. I know that that's really cheesy, but if anybody who follows me on Twitter knows anything, they know that I love Roxane Gay. And so, for her to invite me to be a part of her pop-up magazine literally means the most. And essentially, what it was was that I took a little staycation to a hotel locally where I live. I stayed there for a couple days, and she emailed me. And I thought at first that she didn't mean to email me. [chuckling] Like, I thought at first, I was like, is this like one of those things like a donate thing? But then I opened the email, and she's like, "Will you write for me this pop-up magazine? It's going to be about unruly bodies, whatever that means to you." And then she asked me the idea that I had, and then I told her. And then I squealed for like an hour afterward because I was like, I can't believe this is happening to me. I love her so much.

And essentially, I sent her the piece, and she edited it. And then she told me where it needed to be fixed, I fixed it, and then it came out and the world knew. And it was like one of those secrets that I was dying to tell Twitter. I was like, I wanted to be like, "Guys, guess what happened! My favorite writer in the whole wide world wanted me to write a piece, and so I did." But it just means a lot to me also because there's so many other talented writers in the pop-up magazine that to be considered worthy enough to write alongside of them meant so much to me. And I was just floored because if there's one thing that Roxane Gay knows, it's that she knows I love her and that I'm a really big fan. And being able to write for her felt as important to me as being able to interview her for *Harper's Bazaar*. I was freaking out then. And so, to be able to do both a journalistic interview with her and also be edited by her in something that she crafted means so much to me simply because I think it validates or helps validate what it is that I do. Because it wasn't like she just picked any old random person. She was just like, these are the people that I want to be in this thing, and I think that they're talented and what have you. And I'm just like, I'm one of those people! It means a lot to me to be seen in that way by someone who I admire so much.

ALICE: Talking about bodies, and in particular, unruly bodies, which I just kinda love that title, the idea that disabled bodies are part of this conversation and to have your perspective and your story part of this larger collection about different kinds of bodies is really significant. And why do you think it's important to talk about disabled bodies and to really kind of flesh out the experience of disabled bodies?

KEAH: I think that it's important because so often, we're never able to tell our own stories about our own bodies. Often, it's that we are the ones who are stuck in this one singular narrative that our bodies are terrible and we hate them and they're the worst and how do you wanna live and be happy in a disabled body? So, for me to write about being on the other side of that while also acknowledging the days when you kind of slip back into that and have the full range of emotion, like the whole spectrum of emotion to talk about it was so important to me because I wanted people to understand the journey that I'm taking but also understand that everybody has an unruly body. And so, it doesn't matter if you love—you know what I mean—it doesn't matter if you have bumps and bruises and scars and cuts. Every single body's unruly. So, the idea that we must hide away these bodies is something that I wanna help change simply because you're gonna see my body whether you like it or not. And I don't care because I like it, and I think that to tell these stories is going to help, hopefully help, disabled people come to terms with themselves and love themselves despite living in a world that doesn't quite love us yet.

[upbeat, poppy music break]

## Advice for people who want to start writing or getting published

ALICE: What is your advice for folks who wanna get published, whether it's pitching or getting started writing?

KEAH: For me, I think the advice is to just keep reading and find the things that you love and read those things. And so, if you wanna pitch somewhere like *Harper's Bazaar,* read them widely first. And then, after you read them, you can wait for their, like find a editor that you think that you'd mesh well with after you read their section and pitch them. And also make sure that you have a, if you can, have a steady media presence, social media presence. Because a lot of my career success has been through word of mouth through social media. So, when I wrote for Catapult, I wrote an essay called *Love*, no it was *Disability and Movies*. And I wrote about rom-coms, which I love and sort of not seeing myself onscreen. But that led to ESPNW, and then ESPNW led to *Harper's Bazaar*. But it was because I had a steady social media presence that people found my work, and then they found my website. But they found my work through social media because somebody that they followed retweeted it.

And so, a lot of what I would tell people is not only just to read the places that you want to write for and keep an eye on the way that things that you wanna write are trending, so the way that the genre is trending. So, like if you like fiction, watch out for the way that editors are editing fiction and who's doing what, who's doing where, but also just make sure that you yourself have a really prolific social media presence because that's helped me a bunch. Twitter's a hot mess, as you know, but it's given me kind of the platform to continue to grow as a writer because I'm getting opportunities from editors who would've never read my work otherwise had it not been for me posting it on social media and it gaining traction. But also just make sure that what you're writing about is something that you wanna write about. I know that it's very easy to be like, OK, I'm just gonna write this thing to get my foot in the door, but when you're writing something that you don't really care about, it shows in the work.

The biggest thing that I've learned is that editors are very busy people, and so if you send in a pitch, and you haven't heard anything in two days, three days, that's standard. They have huge piles that they're working through. And so, for me, I really only send a follow-up email a week and a half after I've sent in my pitch and I haven't heard anything. So, for me, it's just trying to find patience. And then, when we do work together, understand that there are going to be some things that you loved when you wrote this draft that won't be in the final piece. And so, you have to be able to share enough of yourself but also be comfortable being edited. I think that a lot of people don't think about that when they shop a piece, and someone says yes and then there's edits. I think that you can still fight to keep the stuff that really matters to you but understand that you're going to lose some things that you loved in the piece, and you're going to lose some things that you thought were great but don't necessarily translate well to someone who is outside of that experience or outside of your personal mind will think that that's important because that's what makes pieces better is when you have an outside opinion on your piece.

But as far as a steady working relationship, I do have a steady one with *Harper's Bazaar,* and a lot of that has just been cultivated by my being kind and generous and not too nit-picky in the pieces that they edited and not too—not confident, 'cause I think confident is the wrong word—you should be confident in your work but also just not too demanding of them. And I think a lot of what helps with editor-writer relationships is your personality and your choices and the way that you craft an email to them. So, always try to be as kind as possible, as patient as possible, and as sure of whatever it is that you are pitching as possible.

[upbeat, poppy music break]

## Keah's book, The Pretty One, and her writing process

ALICE: And right now, you're working on your own essay collection called *The Pretty One*, which will be out published by Atria Books next spring. And tell me a little bit about, I guess, your writing process and how you stay kind of disciplined or what your routine is like right now.

KEAH: I wanted to make sure that I didn't write in order because I felt like if I wrote the essays in order of how they are in the Table of Contents, it was going to make me lose track of what I was doing. So, the first thing that I wanted to make sure that I did was shuffle the essays around so that I wasn't writing them in order. Now, what's interesting is that the last two—so, I think we're pushing for 13 total essays—so, 12 and 13 I'm writing right after each other. So, those are the only two that are going to be in order, and so I'm in the tail end of finishing it right now. Essentially, the collection, it's about joy and grief and loss and joy again, I think. What I'm hoping is that people read a story about a girl who went from being so hard on herself to loving herself and who loves pop culture and who loves music and who loves Stevie Wonder and Brian McKnight. It's just a collection that kind of runs the gamut of topics. So, I cover everything from pop culture representation in media to music and TV shows and jewelry, and there's some mentions of cheesecake in there.

So, I just want it to be a collection that people leave reading happy. You know what I mean? I don't want it to be this collection all about sorrow and pain. I want it to be about a journey to a good place, and I want people to be like, "Oh, OK. This person went through all of this stuff, and she loves herself. And nobody dies in the making of this collection." You're not gonna see a disabled person die at the end of it like you do with pretty much everything that involves us. And so, for me it was very important to show kind of like I said, the wide spectrum of emotion but also hope and joy by the collection.

ALICE: I also am curious about how you settled on the title, *The Pretty One* because what does that title mean to you, and where did it emerge in your own ideas? How did that title happen?

KEAH: First of all, I do love the title. And I feel bad, but I didn't think of it. My editor thought of it.

ALICE: Oh, interesting!

KEAH: Yeah! Right, right. So, at first we were going to do, I wrote a essay for Lenny Letter called *Freedom of a Ponytail*, and it chronicles just like the time that I figured out how to put my hair into a ponytail unassisted. So, we were going to title it *Freedom of a Ponytail*, but one of the editors at Atria was like, oh, they were thinking of titles. 'Cause I told them, I was like, "I don't hate *Freedom of a Ponytail*. I like the title, but I was kinda hoping for something else that could encapsulate the entire collection. And so, she had mentioned *The Pretty One*, and I was like, "Oh, that's perfect" because for me, I think it just turns the idea of what pretty is on its head. I think the title will, I think the title really does encapsulate how I feel about beauty and how I feel about living well and feeling good in my body and how that's what pretty is to me. Pretty can be more about your physical looks. It can be less about your physical looks and more about how you feel internally about yourself. And so, I think for me, the title is just a perfect encapsulation of what the entire collection is about 'cause it'll lead to what I think pretty is and what I think matters to me now in this place where I feel good about myself.

ALICE: It's not about literal prettiness, you know? It's about something bigger than that, and I think that's what a lot of folks don't understand about your hashtag, #DisabledAndCute. It's not about literal cuteness; it's about being powerful and feeling the self-love.

KEAH: Yes! And I think too, for me, what I hope people understand is that your physical looks, my physical looks, like I think that I am actually cute. You know what I mean? I think physically, I'm cute as well, but I think you're right: I hope that people understand this is more about a feeling than it is about a way that somebody actually looks. I'll pop on a cute outfit, and I'll be like, oh, you know, I look good today because I feel good. And I think so much of the issue that people seem to have is this idea that I'm being too vain. But when you live in disabled bodies, you're not often allowed that feeling of confidence in who you are because people just expect you to hate yourself. And I think that for me, so much of my journey has been like, OK, I like the way that I look physically, but I like the way that I feel as well. And so, I wanna celebrate both of those things.

ALICE: And those things can't be separated, I think. And I think that's why people don't understand when people do write about being pretty or cute, that it's a lot broader than that. It's a lot more deeper than that. It's not necessarily superficial because people do get hung up on certain words because I think everybody has baggage with certain words. And certain words have a certain connotation. But your intent is, I think, deeper than that, but I think that's how I read your work.

KEAH: Well, I'm glad 'cause that's what I hope people will take away from it. I think that we, like I said, we're never given that same sort of opportunity to be, to celebrate ourselves and to be "vain." You know what I mean? I think that so often, it's like, oh, they should hate themselves. And a lot of the pushback, like I said, with the Stephen Hawking article is the idea that how dare you feel free as a wheelchair user? How dare you feel free as a disabled person? Shouldn't you hate yourself? And it's like, for me, so much of my work is pushing back against that idea. Because I don't feel that way anymore, and so I wanna talk about the other side while talking about those years that I spent feeling that way. But showing people that there is another side to it, that you don't have to live your life hating yourself just because society doesn't know how to handle you loving yourself. Do it anyway, you know? And I think that's what I have to keep telling myself every day is like, it's an everyday process. But do it anyway. That's kind of the hill that I want to "die on": people feeling good about themselves whether you're disabled or not, but especially if you're disabled because we don't get that same opportunity.

ALICE: And while your book will be coming out next year, anything else you wanna share about being a writer or about this particular collection that you're working on?

KEAH: As a writer—and I have written in a bunch of places like you said—but I think I'm so proud of this in particular because I've always dreamed of writing a book. First it was fiction, and I still, fiction is still, that's happening. I just feel it in my bones. But I've always dreamed of writing a book, but it never felt possible. And it's happening, and I think what I can tell you about it is that it's something that means the world to me. And I'm literally falling in love with my own work, and not in like a cheesy, "It's so great! It's perfect. It can't be edited," way. But just in telling my story, I feel like I'm learning so much about myself. And what I hoe is that people with disabilities and people without them take away my joy from it and how good it feels to tell these stories and to put a sort of positive representation in literature that we don't really have aside from a few other authors who write about disability and who write it well because they are disabled. But I think for me, it's just a collection of essays that I love with all my heart, and I hope that other people do as well and that it's just, it's been such a fun process writing these essays, even when it's like some days it's isolating 'cause I am just with my computer trying to tell these stories. And they will be out in the world one day, but I just want people to love them as much as I do and to understand that this is a lot of blood, sweat, and tears going into this book. And I

hope that people enjoy it when they read it, and I hope that they read it in general. So, that's [chuckles]….

Also, outside of the book, I just hope that people take away from my work in general is just that they learn something but also for disabled people in particular, that they see themselves in my work, and they see that I'm trying alongside everybody else. And I'm just here to tell some stories because I think they need to be told, and I think that we are all people who have stories worth telling. It's just about the opportunity and the patience and the drive to tell those stories.

## Wrap-up

ALICE: Well, Keah, I am so thankful to know you and to be a fan of your writing. And thank you for sharing your time with me today.

KEAH: Oh, thank you, Alice! I'm so excited, like I said, that we're finally doing this.

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more Keah's writing and her book on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ there's a stairway to heaven
so tell me how the hell we
gonna get in?
lord knows where i'm heading
it's hard out here for a gimp
it's hard out here for a gimp ♪